DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 431 CS 509 525

AUTHOR Holmes, Christian
TITLE Edifying Teachers in the Networked Classroom.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Joint Meetings of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (San Antonio, TX, March 26-29, 1997).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; Computer Assisted Instruction; *Computer Mediated Communication; *Computer Networks; Cultural Context; Higher Education; *Student Empowerment; Student Reaction; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Liberatory Learning; *Technology Role

ABSTRACT

Most instructors today feel that using computers in classrooms to create electronic forums automatically results in a more egalitarian setting, but technology can become an effective cloak for otherwise oppressive practices. These settings can potentially reinscribe dominant ideologies, edifying students rather than empowering them. These classrooms can be the sites of liberatory learning, but not without informed and implemented pedagogies. A more critical interpretation of technology is the first step. The hierarchical arrangement of design and programming, the value of English as the primary language of computer users (ASCII), and other less obvious examples all show a system that supports a dominant culture and further distances students who are from the margins of race, class, and gender. One solution is to develop an awareness of the asymmetrical relations of power implicit in collaboration and to learn to negotiate, in new ways and with new understandings, the spaces occupied for such work. By presenting and exposing the diverse, often conflicting views found in networked settings, students learn how to read and interpret conflicts, confrontations, and alternatives in the classroom and in their lives. In networked settings, teachers should involve themselves in discussions rather than monitor or suppress conversations they feel are inappropriate. Exploring conflicts inside the classroom allows edifying teachers to keep spaces open for conversation, pushing both students and teachers to new levels of understanding and acceptance. (Contains 15 references.) (CR)

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Christian Weisser
University of South Florida

ED 408 631

"Edifying Teachers in the Networked Classroom"

A recent list discussion (stemming from a communication across the curriculum workshop) contained significant and somewhat frightening comments as to how student discourse should be controlled in computer-mediated collaboration. Teachers across several disciplines seemed to exhibit an unhealthy desire to regulate student discourse in electronic classrooms. These comments included desires to "have students monitored fairly closely to make sure they are working on the task and not just playing around," and pleas for "professor[s] to exercise control over subjects during class and lab time." Others felt more diplomatic inclinations to "allow students time to semi-flame, making sure that there are rules and guidelines . . . with the understanding that anyone caught flaming will somehow be reprimanded." One teacher declared that "freedom of speech should be encouraged within limitations that everyone understands" (Selfe). Although "liberatory teaching" and "student-centered pedagogies" have become frequently used buzzwords among educators in their scholarly conversations, the comments made during this discussion and others I have

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observed leads me to believe that many of us work within a more traditional pedagogical framework than we would like to admit. While most writing teachers would agree that encouraging student interactions and extending student authority in the classroom are admirable goals, many of us are reluctant to restrict our own authority, and we return to teacher-centered practice under the guise of maintaining order. We speak of radical and critical perspectives in our journals and scholarly conversations, but somehow neglect to enact them in our classrooms. Our good intentions to edify and empower our students remain just that--good intentions. Although teacher-centered control of student discourse is obviously detrimental in the classroom, unrestricted interaction between students can be equally suppressive and pernicious. We must adopt and initiate theories which enable our students to negotiate these "electronic contact zones"; theories which allow marginalized students to be heard while encouraging the critical examination of all perspectives and voices.

Many instructors today feel that using computers in classrooms to create electronic forums automatically results in a more egalitarian setting. As Sibylle Gruber notes in her study of computer-mediated communication, some instructors "rely on the technology to facilitate learning and change existing practices" (74). Technology can unwittingly become an effective cloak for otherwise oppressive

practices. By viewing computer classrooms (and computer collaboration) as inherently diplomatic, we neglect the obvious; that these settings can potentially reinscribe dominant ideologies and stifle students rather than empower them. Certainly computer classrooms can be the sites of liberatory learning, but not without informed and implemented pedagogies. Selfe and Selfe note that "computers, like other complex technologies, are articulated in many ways with a range of existing cultural forces and with a variety of projects in our educational system, projects that run the gamut from liberatory to oppressive" (482). If democratic classrooms are our goal, we must actively engage in pedagogies in the computer classroom which will enable this goal. A more critical interpretation of technology is the first step, as computers are capable of serving democratic ends but don't do so necessarily.

Our criticism should start with the technology itself. Computer interfaces are "always already" invested with certain "ideological and material legacies of racism, sexism, and colonialism" (484). What we see on our screens reveals much about the dominant perspectives which the technology has emerged from. Many computer interfaces present a homogenized version of the reality most familiar to its "typical" (read: professional white male) user. For example, the Macintosh

interface "maps the virtual world as a desktop--constructing virtual reality, by association, in terms of corporate culture and the values of professionalism" (486). The items found in this arena are those familiar to the corporate world: folders, files, documents, spreadsheets, telephones, fax machines, and calendars. By examining what is not included in this interface, we can easily interpret its ideological orientation. The interface does not, for example, "represent the world in terms of a kitchen counter top, a mechanic's workbench, or a fast-food restaurant--each of which would constitute the virtual world in different terms according to [other] values and orientations" (487). In addition, many of these interfaces contain "semiotic messages" (such as the ubiquitous white pointer hand) that signal to "users of color, to users who come from a non-English language background, to users from low socio-economic backgrounds--that entering the virtual worlds of interfaces also means, at least in part, entering a world constituted around the lives and values of white, male, middle- and upper-class professionals" (487). There are many other ways in which dominant values are rendered through these interfaces. The hierarchical arrangement of design and programming, the value of English as the primary language of computer users (ASCII), and other, less obvious examples all show a system that supports

dominant culture and further distances students who are from the margins of race, class, and gender. Indeed, the technology is not "innocent", nor are computer classrooms the "linguistic utopias" (483) that many educators imagine them to be. We must admit to ourselves and to our students that computer interfaces are interested in the maintenance of dominant values and culture.

But the technology is not all that keeps us from our liberatory intentions in the computer classroom. Network collaboration does not necessarily facilitate equal participation or minimize dissent and conflict. Hierarchical structures, racial prejudice, and sexual stereotypes remain intact in these settings and are sometimes even more prominent and disruptive than they are in the traditional classroom. Several proponents for the networked classroom have argued that the relatively infrequent number of "flamings" and "electronic misunderstandings" (Gruber 62) are outweighed by positive effects such as increased student participation, more successful collaboration, and decentralization of the classroom (Barker & Kemp; Cooper & Selfe; Hawisher). However, a growing number of critics feel that a networked setting often reinscribes the very problems we wish to negate.

Arrangements which enable "free" discussion on topics touching on homosexuality "often, in fact, 'empower' expressions of homophobia--and

homophobia works to silence the expression of sexual difference " (qtd. in Warshauer 97). Oppressively homophobic attitudes often dominate networked discussions and contribute to the feelings of "voicelessness" that are expressed by some gay and lesbian students. Alison Regan acknowledges the fact that her failure to intervene during oppressive electronic discussions may have further contributed to the alienation of certain homosexual students (18). Women's voices are often ignored or overlooked during interchanges. One survey conducted by Susan Herring seemed to suggest that men tend to dominate electronic conversations through adversarial stances. Herring posits that "women and men have different communication ethics, and flaming is compatible with male ethical ideals" and notes that "men might be put off by the supportive and attenuated behaviors of women" (149). While Herring fails to note the complex connection between discursive style and social situation (*why* gender affects our communication ethics), her basic premise that an imbalance exists "whereby men control a disproportionate share of the communication that takes place via computer networks" (152) is a valid one. Minorities and lower socioeconomic populations encounter resistance both from other students and from the pedagogies we enact in their classrooms. In schools with larger minority

populations, "computers are used primarily to provide basic skills instruction delivered by drill-and-practice software . . . In contrast, computer use in majority schools is characterized by its emphasis on the use of computers as tools to develop higher order literary and cognitive skills of study" (qtd. in Selfe & Selfe). Likewise, even students who fit the demographic mold are often harassed or excluded from networked conversations because they hold dissenting or marginal opinions. The anonymity of electronic conferences, which many educators rank as a great benefit, can be a double-edged sword. While it can offer the opportunity of free and uninterrupted speech to some, it can also be used as a forum to persecute and harass an individual who goes against the rest of the class. In addition, the anonymity of many electronic "collaborative spaces" also allows those who do the persecuting the perfect opportunity to do so without fear of reprisal. Inscribed within the writer's freedom to be candid and anonymous lies the potential to use the technology as a device to oppress and menace others. As Joseph Janangelo asserts, "the new technology, when left unattended, create[s] more opportunities for oppression than for liberation" (59). This is not to question the potential value of these spaces, only to point out that networked classrooms are not ideologically or technologically neutral. Electronic classrooms can become

the sites of great learning experiences--provided we recognize their dangers and implement critical theories which recognize the potential they have for reinscribing dominant ideologies.

That these electronic collaborative spaces have particular dangers should come as no great surprise. The problems that have been noted regarding collaboration in the traditional classroom also apply in networked settings. Collaboration, as it was advocated by Kenneth Bruffee, Harvey Weiner, and others, intends to "provide a context in which students can practice and master the normal discourse exercised in established knowledge communities" (Bruffee 644). Through conversation, students arrive at consensus and, in effect, join the "conversation of mankind" (645). The consensus that is so implicit in collaborative learning is seen as something that just is, rather than something which might be good or bad. More recent left-wing critics of collaboration want to redefine consensus by locating it in the "prevailing balance of power" (Trimbur 608). They view consensus as a problematic force which supports dominant discourse and excludes abnormal (student) discourse. As Greg Myers suggests, "Any teacher who uses group discussions or projects has seen that they can, on occasion, be fierce enforcers of conformity" (159). Bruffee allows that abnormal

discourse does have its place in consensus as a force which complements normal discourse. Bruffee sees abnormal discourse as something which "students can turn to from time to time to question business as usual and to keep the conversation going" (Bruffee 648). Seen more critically, abnormal discourse is not so much something that arises to keep the conversation going as it is a voice of dissent from the marginalized corners of the conversational spectrum. Abnormal discourse "refers to the relations of power that determines what falls within the current consensus and what is assigned the status of dissent" (Trimbur 608). Recognizing the political nature of discourses in collaborative spaces is a crucial first step toward our real goal of more liberatory classrooms and more democratic teaching.

Our solution, then, is to develop in ourselves--and in our students--an awareness of the asymmetrical relations of power implicit in collaboration, and to learn to negotiate in new ways and with new understandings the spaces we occupy for such work. Blind faith in collaboration results in domination of conversations by normal discourse, since normal discourse is a function of consensus. Understanding this, the continued foregrounding of the interested nature of consensus and how it works in collaborative spaces is imperative. That

collaborative spaces, whether on computer networks or in traditional settings, can be the sites of liberatory learning is unquestionable. But for this to happen, we must first understand how normal and abnormal discourses function (or *can* function) in these settings.

A particularly useful stance on the roles of normal and abnormal discourse in the classroom is that taken by Xin Liu Gale in *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom*. Gale's inquiry mediates between two extreme positions: the traditional presentational model, which is heavily reliant upon teacher control, and the "radical" or "liberatory" position that attempts to redistribute power and authority in the classroom by teaching alternatives to dominant discourse. As I have noted, our pedagogies in networked classrooms tend to gravitate to one or the other of these extremes--despite our inclinations. Although Gale generally supports the agenda of the radical educationists, she "disagrees that the effort to replace the teaching of the dominant discourse with that of other discourses will ultimately result in change in either the traditional classroom or in the power and influence of the teacher's authority" (viii). In other words, Gale supports the goal of liberatory teaching, but feels that all previous attempts to democratize the classroom have failed to recognize the

extent and pervasiveness of dominant discourse and its relationship with other discourses. Much of the teachers discourse is dependent upon institutional (dominant) authority and cannot be completely severed from it. Some power relationship will always exist in both the traditional classroom and one reliant upon technology. Accepting the indispensability of institutional authority in teaching (and the ever-existing potential danger of its use in the classroom), we must rethink the relationship of discourses in the classroom.

Gale describes the discourse relationship in the classroom as having three components: Nonresponsive Abnormal Discourse (the student's discourse), Normal Discourse (institutional or academic discourse), and Responsive Abnormal Discourse (the liberatory teacher's discourse). The interaction between student and institutional discourse is primary, since it is only through learning normal discourse and academic literacy that students can hope to develop their own liberated discourse. The teacher's discourse also shares a primary relationship to normal discourse, as it is always a *conscious* departure from the norm, an effort to keep a conversation going, to "see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately" (70). Instead of viewing these three discourses as competitive and

confrontational, we can see that their relationship is one of interdependence. The interactions, however, do not aim at reproducing and imitating dominant discourse, but at keeping the conversation going in classrooms and networks so that students who speak Nonresponsive Abnormal Discourse will not be silenced and denied opportunities to create Responsive abnormal discourse. The teacher's Responsive Abnormal Discourse, "be it feminism, deconstruction, critical pedagogy, or cultural studies, interacts at a secondary level with students' Nonresponsive Abnormal Discourse, not only to ensure that the conversation is not stopped and students' sense of wonder is not suppressed, but to reveal how the knowledge of normal discourse can be used for democratic goals in teaching and how the dominant ideology and culture can be effectively resisted with words" (91).

Contrary to the perspective of many liberatory educators, Gale suggests that the relationship between the teacher and the student should be one in which the teacher strives to work *with*, not *for* or *about* students. In other words, the teacher's object of action should not be the student. Rather, the teacher and the student "should act together upon the conditions that prevent human beings from realizing their 'full humanity'" (25). Borrowing from Richard Rorty, Gale presents

a theory wherein "edifying teachers" accommodate normal and abnormal discourses in such a way that the tension between the different, often conflicting discourses provides a space for students to develop their own voices. The main goal of the edifying teacher is to facilitate the interaction of these three discourses so that students who speak Nonresponsive Abnormal Discourse will not be silenced.

Gale's two-level interaction works to expose students to others: other texts, other perspectives, and other beliefs and values. Most of us would agree that our goals in networked classrooms gravitate around our desire to teach critical thinking--the ability to see options and alternatives to conventional thought. By presenting and exposing the diverse, often conflicting views we find in networked settings, we allow our students to see the differences between normal and abnormal discourses. As a result, students learn how to read and interpret conflicts, confrontations, and alternatives in the classroom and in their lives. The important factor is not what we should talk about in networked settings (or what texts we should read), but how we enable our students to enter these conversations and interpret them critically. Exposing the conversations takes precedence over finding answers or truths, and maintaining critical distance from dominant culture

and normal discourse allows teachers to do so.

How can we implant a desire for change in students instead of forcing them to change simply by resorting to our institutional authority? One truly democratic way begins by exposing students to others: other voices, other cultures, and other types of discourse. These others will necessarily include dominant academic discourse--which students probably have not mastered--but should also include marginalized voices and texts as well. To change students consciousness and their relationships with different perspectives requires interactions between the students and the teacher, and the focus of these interactions should be both normal and abnormal discourses. Teaching must become an involvement requiring our active participation rather than a game in which we are spectators or enforcers. In networked settings, we need to involve ourselves in discussions rather than monitor or suppress conversations we feel are inappropriate. We should try in every way to "make the conversation in the classroom [or in electronic collaboration] reflective of the conversation in the real world, so that students can get a foothold in the academic community and gradually learn to participate in the conversation of academics and to eventually generate their own Responsive Abnormal Discourse" (129). We should urge

changes in student discourse that attempts to suppress others not merely because we feel it is morally deficient, but primarily because we believe that student's discourse will benefit from other perspectives and discourses.

The type of interaction that is offered here is not without conflict. On the contrary, it seeks out disagreement and attempts to engage it critically. This means that we can no longer turn students loose during electronic interchanges and hope that they learn from and successfully interact with each other. Nor can we adopt the positions taken by those teachers mentioned earlier who wish to "monitor" and "reprimand" discourses which fall outside of safe, homogenous constraints. We must be wary of assuming that we are somehow morally superior. Understanding our own partiality to certain views will help us to recognize and accommodate the diverse views of our students. Our task, then, in electronic collaboration is a much more complicated one than that of the teacher who either controls student discourse or allows it complete freedom. By actively engaging in conversation with our students as edifying teachers, we will become their conversational partners rather than instructional leaders. Exploring conflicts inside the classroom and out allows edifying teachers to keep spaces open for conversation, pushing both our students and ourselves to new levels of

understanding and acceptance. Students may learn more diplomatic means of communicating with one another. We, in turn, may learn better ways of exploring difference in networked classrooms. Most importantly, teacher and student may both come away from the class having learned more about how to articulate and become more responsive to the differences which exist between us in our classrooms and in our world.

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